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Linking Classes: Learning Communities, "High" Culture, and the Working Class Student

Abstract

How do you teach the humanities to working class students living in the shadow of a BP oil refinery?

Calumet College uses freshman learning communities that link humanities, social justice, and English composition classes to provide a foundation for college success to predominantly first-generation students who are often underprepared for college-level courses. This article describes the program, including the curricular linkages between the classes. Retention results between students who took stand-alone classes are compared to students who participated in loosely linked learning communities and closely linked learning communities. In addition, data from a pre- and post-course assessment of students' knowledge of general humanities concepts is included. A notable finding was the consistently higher performance of cohorts enrolled in closely linked learning communities, those in which the instructors shared assignments, responded to ideas raised in their colleagues' classes, and met regularly to discuss students' needs.

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Keywords

humanities, working class students, underprepared students

Introduction

Gabriel Mota is a cage fighter.

In his senior year of high school, his mother worked six jobs to keep the family afloat. His grandfather boxed as a semi-pro and Gabe wrestled in high school, so when a promoter offered him real money to cage fight, he jumped at the chance.

"I had a lot to fight for," Gabe said.

A junior at Calumet College of St. Joseph (CCSJ), Gabe is majoring in Exercise and Sports Science. He attends school during the day, works a few hours afterward, and trains at night. Like most students at CCSJ, Gabe is a working-class student, underprepared for college but a fighter.

A commuter school, CCSJ serves 1,259 working class students. The school is located in northwest Indiana's industrial corridor, the home of BP oil refineries and Arcelor Mittal Steel. The Missionaries of the Precious Blood established the College in 1951 to serve oil and steel workers and their families. Today, we serve the descendants of those original steel and oil workers as well as new immigrants pursuing the American dream.

Calumet College is a twenty-minute drive from the Impressionist masterpieces at the Art Institute of Chicago and a half hour from Chicago's Shakespeare Theater on Navy Pier. Unfortunately, this world and the world of most CCSJ students seldom meet. Our students have neither the time, the money, nor the education to experience the cultural riches of Chicago.

They are too busy fighting, like Gabe.

At Calumet College of St. Joseph, we decided the best way to prepare students like Gabe to go forward was to go back, to revise our required general education program around a single traditional course in the Western humanities. Traditional humanities courses in Western culture are, of course, threatening to become an anachronism, caught between a push for utility, the need of first-generation students to find jobs in an increasingly competitive global marketplace, and a professoriate grown hostile toward the hegemony of a patriarchal Western culture. But we agree with Earl Shorris, who argues that "the moral life of downtown"—the cultural capital one finds in the classics at the Art Institute and the Shakespeare Theater—provides the "entrance to reflection and the political life" necessary to escape minimum wage jobs and poverty for professional positions (Shorris, 1997). Our mission, therefore, is to bring the humanities to underprepared students living in the shadow of a BP oil refinery.

Calumet College of St. Joseph

Today, the original population the Missionaries of the Precious Blood served in 1951 has changed, and CCSJ is the only Hispanic-serving college or university in Indiana; over 30 percent of our student body is Hispanic. In addition, approximately 20 percent of our student body is African American. With the majority of our students coming from minority groups, *US News and World Report* consistently ranks CCSJ among the most diverse liberal arts colleges in the Midwest

In addition, more than 90 percent of our students are first-generation college students whose families are unacquainted with many aspects of academic culture. Students with these characteristics are the least likely to graduate from college. Yet we are committed to providing the opportunity for all our students to graduate, secure meaningful employment, and contribute their skills to the community.

In 2004, to meet our mission, Calumet College established a special initiative, Centering on Retention and Enrollment (CORE), to support academic success among students from low-performing school systems. The program's mission is to give these students the foundation they need to be successful in college and in the workforce.

By 2009, however, it had become clear the support services and tutoring/mentoring programs of the CORE initiative were not enough to substantially improve retention and graduation rates for these students. In response Calumet College of St. Joseph chose to revamp its General Education program to better serve a student body that comes to college woefully underprepared.

Linked Classes for First-Year Students

In developing the new Gen Ed program, CCSJ's faculty avoided the popular cafeteria approach to course selection in favor of a mandated and prescriptive program. They founded the program on freshman learning communities in the first semester that link two signature courses and a third skills-based course. These three linked courses are at the heart of the freshman's first year schedule:

- (1) Humanities 110, The Foundations of Western Culture, a traditional introduction to the Western humanities that provides the *intellectual foundation* of their college education;
- (2) Religious Studies 110, Social Justice, a theological introduction to social justice that provides the *moral inspiration* for the general education program; and
- (3) English 103, English Composition, an introduction to reading college level texts and writing basic academic essays that provides the *skills core* of their education.

Since the beginning of the 2010–11 academic year, when this model was fully implemented, 75 to 85 percent of freshmen have participated in learning communities each semester. The remaining students take unlinked courses for a variety of reasons: some are transfer students who have already taken one or more of the linked courses elsewhere, some are part-time students who cannot take three classes in a semester, and some are placed into developmental English in the fall and take the Humanities class in the spring.

In each learning community, the three classes function independently, with their own classrooms and objectives. Together, however, they function as a unit to provide a foundation for new students and ensure the success of underprepared students. In theory, the linked courses are mutually supportive, each aiding the others to achieve their objectives; the more the courses are taught, the more this mutually supportive theory becomes a reality. In practice, the three courses work as a triad: the Social Justice and English Composition class minister to the Humanities class, the apex and centerpiece of the freshman experience. Joan Crist, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, who teaches the Social Justice course in the freshman learning communities, refers to the structure as a “love triangle.”

Our traditional humanities course—The Foundations of Western Culture—provides students with both the arc of Western cultural history and an encounter with classics of the Western cultural tradition. Most of our students enter college with little or no knowledge of Western culture—not even a rudimentary outline of it—so we pitch half of the humanities course to the bottom two levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, knowledge and understanding. At these levels, we introduce students to historical dates, important movements, key concepts, and famous writers and artists. But the other half of the course gives students a taste of the real purpose of the humanities, debates over the perennial human questions. We focus these debates on an annual theme. In 2011 and 2012 the theme was the nature of “the good life”; “metamorphosis” is the theme for the 2013–14 academic year. Each week students encounter a work from the canon of Western classics that illustrates the theme, serially examining alternative visions of the good life such as the Stoic vision of Epictetus, the monastic asceticism of the Desert Fathers, Leonardo’s ideal of the Renaissance Man, and so on.

The Social Justice class provides the Humanities class with its *moral inspiration*. As previously explained, Calumet College of St. Joseph is an urban Catholic school with the mission of educating the underserved. A signature course, Social Justice inculcates in students the values of social service. The humanities course introduces the process of “doing” the humanities, but supports the message of the social justice class as well. The humanities course opens with a key text in the history of social justice: Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan. Freshmen study the parable in its original form in the Gospel of Luke, in Rembrandt’s illustration of the parable, and in e.e. cummings’ modern poem retelling the story.

The parable of the Good Samaritan text plays three roles: (1) it introduces three different types of humanities (religion, art, and literature); (2) it introduces the ways key stories are adapted at different historical moments for different purposes; and (3) it becomes a touchstone of the Judeo-Christian moral vision against which alternative views can be interrogated. In this way, students test the Judeo-Christian tradition into which most of them were born; they are taught to understand alternatives, to recognize mutually exclusive positions, and to begin constructing their own vision. The Humanities class devotes the rest of the semester to developing knowledge of the eras of Western cultural history, understanding the power of the humanities, and exploring alternative views of the annual theme.

The English Composition class, the learning community workhorse, develops the reading and writing skills our underprepared students need to succeed in the other two courses. The English Comp teachers do the heavy lifting, helping students develop the reading, note-taking, and writing skills required to succeed in the two content courses.

We best meet the goal of linked classes—to achieve genuinely mutual support—through the relationship of our English Composition class to our Humanities class. The first goal of the composition course is to get students reading and summarizing college-level material, first in well-organized, grammatically standard paragraphs and then in similarly successful essays. Every Monday, in a standard lecture format, the humanities instructor introduces the cultural era of the week; this lecture provides the students with the content of the day's in-class writing for the English composition class. As soon as the humanities class ends, the students proceed to their composition class, where the instructor greets them with an assignment: to summarize the main points of the humanities lecture in a single, well-developed paragraph.

This seemingly simple assignment has a variety of salutary effects for both classes. First, the students practice the skills of sentence composition and paragraph construction. Second, the students correct, clarify, and consolidate their understanding of the content of the week's humanities class; the assignment functions as a regular review and study session, a habit most underprepared students have yet to acquire. Third, and perhaps most importantly, by requiring students to articulate and synthesize what they have heard in the humanities classroom, the weekly paragraph routine forces underprepared students out of their habitual passivity, pushing them to actively construct their knowledge.

These weekly exercises also prepare students for their most important linked assignment—the Humanities class essay. The assignment is straightforward: in five well-developed paragraphs, using specific examples from their humanities reading selections, the students must summarize three alternative visions of, for example, the good life. Only when faced with this task do students begin to

appreciate the work they've done on the required weekly paragraphs; only then do they see that the weekly writing has actually been preparation for their essay.

The Humanities essay doubles as the English Composition Competency Essay. To pass their freshman composition class, CCSJ students must submit a writing portfolio which a committee of English instructors assesses. A key feature of their portfolio, the traditional five-paragraph essay demonstrates their mastery of the academic form, their ability to organize an essay around a thesis supported by three equivalent main points. Our underprepared students lack this basic skill, or they have only pieces of it. The essay requires students to demonstrate their composition skills and display their understanding of the humanities reading.

Results

The success of these linked courses is being measured in two ways: through retention data (fall 2010 to winter/spring 2011, and fall 2010 to fall 2011), and through a simple pre-test/post-test assessment of knowledge and understanding of the three primary objectives of Humanities 110.

Retention data indicate that, despite some variations in freshman semester-to-semester retention rates, learning communities outperform non-learning community groups in retention from freshman to sophomore year. Table 1 shows retention from freshman first semester to second semester, and Table 2 shows retention from first-semester freshman year to first-semester sophomore year.

Table 1
Freshman first-semester to freshman second-semester retention

	2010	2011
L/Cs	76.9%	82.7%
Non-L/C	54.2%	88.9%

Table 2
Freshman first-semester to sophomore first-semester retention

	2010	2011
L/Cs	58.7%	62.5%
Non-L/C	31.3%	27.8%

In addition to analyzing retention data, we also administer a very basic pre-test and post-test of basic knowledge to all students in Humanities 110. In the first week of classes all students in this course, whether in linked classes or not, take a brief, 25-question pretest that asks them to place major eras in the arc of Western culture in chronological order, match a list of key concepts (such as humanism, rationalism, and modernism) to their definitions, and place major cultural works in time (see Appendix 1). These three areas—knowing the arc of Western culture,

knowing key concepts, and understanding how these ideas are expressed in individual works of philosophy, literature, art, music, and history—represent the first three objectives of the class, the objectives that focus on knowing (remembering) and understanding. These are the objectives that a basic test can easily assess. Students take the same exam (with questions in different order) in the last week of class.

The pretest/post-test tool is meant only to test knowledge and understanding gained through the course, not to be a statistically significant assessment of its impact. Nevertheless, it provides some insights into learning in the classroom. First, the results of the test reinforce what we already knew from experience in our classrooms: all our students enter college with little knowledge of Western cultural history; the average pretest score was 30 percent—less than a student could earn simply by guessing. The test also demonstrates something else we consistently find in the classroom: students arrive with no common cultural touchstones. At the end of the course, students improved their ability to recognize people, artworks, and ideas by an average of 36 percent in 2011 and 27 percent in 2012.

The pretest/post-test assessment, like the retention data, provides somewhat mixed comparisons of linked and unlinked classes. Table 3 illustrates the eight Humanities 110 sections offered in fall 2011, and Table 4 presents the ten sections offered in fall 2012.

Table 3
Humanities sections, fall 2011

Group	Pretest Average	Post-test Average	Percent Increase
G	26%	43%	17%
A	27%	47%	20%
F	29%	52%	23%
B	31%	61%	30%
X (non-linked)	31%	71%	40%
C (closely linked)	28%	80%	52%
E (closely linked)	29%	80%	51%
H (closely linked)	35%	90%	55%

Table 4
Humanities sections, fall 2012

Group	Pretest Average	Post-test Average	Percent Increase
J	44%	44%	0%
B	36%	52%	16%
E	31%	49%	18%
X (non-linked)	30%	50%	20%
H	33%	71%	38%
F	41%	81%	40%
G	36%	80%	44%
D	42%	89%	47%
A (closely linked)	34%	86%	52%
C (closely linked)	32%	87%	55%

Seven of the courses offered in fall 2011 were linked and one, Group X, shown in the bottom row of the table, was unlinked. Group X slightly outperformed the average improvement of 36 percent. We found that this instructor consistently emphasized memorizing the arc of history, one section of the test. The students mastered that component, thereby raising their scores. In spring 2012, which is not represented in the tables, the two unlinked classes improved by 37 percent and 31 percent in comparison to the 36 percent average improvement in the fall. The instructors for those two classes were the same instructors responsible for the groups that showed the greatest improvement the previous fall, Groups C, E, and H, all linked classes, which improved by 52 percent, 51 percent, and 55 percent respectively.

The pre-test/post-test results led us to ask how different instructors implement the link between courses. We asked faculty members who teach in the freshman linked courses these three questions:

- Did the classes share assignments?
- Did one of the linked classes respond to work in the other during at least a quarter of the class sessions?
- Did instructors share class information regularly (defined as weekly)?

This further investigation showed that we are not working with just two comparison groups, linked and unlinked classes; instead, we have three different types of Humanities sections: unlinked, loosely linked, and closely linked. Closely linked classes are differentiated because they function in practice as the ideal outlined above indicates. The classes share a major essay assignment as well as weekly in-class writing assignments. They respond to ideas raised in the other classes at least a quarter of the time, which equates to seven of the twenty-eight class sessions or more than twice a month. Finally, the instructors meet weekly to discuss progress, concerns, and student needs. Three of seven linked groups met the criteria for closely linked classes in fall 2011: groups C, E, and H in Table 3. The three closely linked groups showed significant improvement over the average 36 percent rate, with scores that increased by 52 percent, 51 percent, and 55 percent respectively. Table 3 demonstrates that the closely linked groups significantly outperformed the other Humanities sections in mastering course content. Similarly, the closely linked groups A and C in fall 2012 also outperformed the other groups; although four groups got close to the 50 percent improvement mark, only the closely linked groups exceeded it.

The Positive Impact of Linked Courses

The initial retention data and pretest/post-test assessments indicate that learning communities tend to have a positive impact on student learning and retention. The data suggest, moreover, that closely linked courses that share assignments, immediately respond to ideas and issues from other classes, and emphasize a close working relationship between instructors improve the chance of successfully teaching a difficult course to underprepared students.

English professor Kirk Robinson claims that linked classes are effective because they make learning—and struggling with learning—real. He explains,

...when students come in grouching about the Allegory of the Cave, or the caves at Lascaux, I say, “oh...yeah...tell me about that. What are you learning?” They suddenly talk to me in a different way. And we struggle together, and when this helps them with the other course, they do it again, and they do it more. Sometimes they'll say, “we wish you taught that class,” by which I think they mean something else. They wish they were having conversations like this...secondary conversations like this...about that work all the time. We ruminate a bit. It's recursive. Suddenly the composition course is a history class, too. In this way they feel a little less alone about their work, and the work seems more connected to the rest of the world.

Students appreciate the different viewpoints that two different instructors bring to the same text or issue. Freshman Gina Guajardo, for instance, pointed out that “I really like how you and Dr. B have such different viewpoints of the Middle Ages. That makes us start to think for ourselves.”

Students recognize the impact of the linked courses in more formal ways as well. On an end-of-year survey that solicits their feelings about many aspects of their freshman experience, including orientation, advising, mentoring, faculty, and courses, students have positive reactions to linked classes for both their social and academic impact. Students average a score of 3.64 on a 4-point Likert scale on the statement “I enjoyed being in linked classes because it helped me socially,” and 3.81 on the statement “I enjoyed being in linked classes because it helped me academically.”

A better indicator of student reaction to linked classes comes from a less formal survey. In the last week of class, we ask students, “Tell us what CCSJ needs to know.” This wide open prompt and the anonymity of responses to it elicits discussion on everything from security to available food options, but some students always address the linked classes. A few students seem confused by the learning community concept. “I never know if I’m writing for Humanities or for

English,” one student claimed, while another said, “It gets repetitive talking about the same thing over and over in one class right after the other.” More students, however, have positive reactions. The most common survey response about academics is a variation on this student comment: “I would never have gottin [sic] thru [sic] humanities if I didn’t review it in English.”

The most gratifying indicator that linked classes have a positive impact comes from the “ah-ha” moments that every learning community instructor shares, those moments in class when students bring their Humanities discussion of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, Ovid’s tale of Daedalus and Icarus, or medieval cathedrals into later discussions. By mid-semester, every instructor reports some students who accomplish this intellectual move, bringing discussions from one setting into another. Moreover, students later look back on the learning communities for a model of how to address a single issue from different disciplinary approaches. Junior Antonio Alvarez thinks CCSJ is “pretty smart” about introducing this approach in freshman learning communities, and Phil Olvera “loved” that the College made the connections for him as a freshman that he now looks for on his own.

Learning Community Issues

Our data also clearly spotlight two major challenges posed by learning communities of underprepared students.

The most serious challenge is to coordinate the work of three instructors who are used to working in silos. This is especially difficult with three classes. Dr. Crist’s analogy to a love triangle points out this difficulty.

“When two courses mesh, the third (usually social justice in our case) gets left out in the cold,” she notes.

Some faculty members are more willing than others to work together and to adjust their class schedules to the needs of others. Technology can help (for example, with online options for communicating), but it cannot do it all. Professor of Religious Studies Eugene Finnegan, who teaches the learning community Social Justice course, finds meeting to coordinate approaches both to students and to curriculum the major challenge of the model; instructors have a difficult time meeting in person, yet online discussion groups have proven to be less effective.

The learning communities model also involves institutional challenges. Dr. Finnegan’s comments indicate the importance of having adequate time for this approach—time to revise classes, to structure assignments, and to coordinate course activities. But at a small, tuition-dependent institution that emphasizes teaching, time is a luxury, and simply encouraging instructor cooperation is not enough. Administrators can promote cooperation among all general education instructors by making it a part of annual performance discussions for all learning

community instructors. Instructors who teach in a freshman learning community can expect that flexibility and cooperation with other instructors in the linked courses will be part of their job.

Conclusions

At Calumet College of St. Joseph, we are still working on our approach to both the underprepared student and to the humanities. We set out with the belief that “high” culture, Shorris’ “moral life of downtown” or the classics of the Western tradition, have something to say to all students, not only students in so-called elite schools, and that some works of the human imagination are great because they speak to people across time and space and cultures. We have verified that great works can give all students the academic skills they need to succeed in college and guidance in discovering their own idea of the good life, but students need support and reiteration to gain those benefits. Closely linking courses seems to be an effective way to provide that support. The learning communities model enables us to teach a challenging course to working class students living in the shadow of a BP oil refinery. It offers a successful way to serve underprepared students who, like Gabe Mota, are fighting for the opportunity for a better life.

Work Cited

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Appendix 1: Humanities Pretest/Post-test

The following basic test of knowledge is used as the Humanities pretest. The post-test uses the same questions in a random alternate order.

I. *Write the letter of each key concept next to its definition:*

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| (a) Romanticism | (b) Enlightenment | (c) Modernism |
| (d) Humanism | (e) Rationalism | (f) Monotheism |

1. _____ A reaction against the Enlightenment and its belief in the power of human reason; the idea that feeling is the source of knowledge.

2. _____ Confidence in human power and ingenuity; a belief that humans are inherently noble.

3. _____ The scientific outlook; the idea that human reason can discover the laws of nature and use that knowledge to solve social problems, leading to progress.

4. _____ The belief in one God who is personally interested in his people and in return requires an unqualified commitment.

5. _____ Rejection of master narratives, the theory of progress, and claims of objectivity; with no universal values to rely on, artists and intellectuals become relativistic, subjective, and experimental.

6. _____ The idea that human reason is the best source of truth about the nature of the world.

II. *Identify the time period in which each of these works was created, using these MAJOR TIME PERIODS:*

- | | | | |
|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Modern World | Middle Ages | Romantic Age | Reformation |
| Enlightenment | Ancient Greece and Rome | | Renaissance |

7. The Parthenon _____

8. Chartres Cathedral _____

9. Michelangelo's *David* _____

10. Picasso's *Guernica* _____

11. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* _____

12. Plato's *Republic* _____

III. Place the following works in their context from among the choices listed.

13. _____ Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*

- (a) The Middle Ages
- (b) The Romantic Age
- (c) The Modern World

14. _____ Ovid's story of Daedalus and Icarus

- (a) The Middle Ages
- (b) The Renaissance
- (c) Classical Rome

15. _____ Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale"

- (a) Ancient Greece
- (b) The Modern Age
- (c) The Middle Ages

16. _____ Romanesque architecture

- (a) Ancient Rome
- (b) The Middle Ages
- (c) The Modern World

17. _____ The Declaration of Independence

- (a) Ancient Rome
- (b) The Middle Ages
- (c) The Enlightenment

18. _____ The *Iliad*

- (a) The Middle Ages
- (b) Ancient Greece
- (c) The Modern World

IV. *Place the following major time periods IN ORDER from earliest to latest to trace the arc of Western history:*

Modern World	Middle Ages	Romantic Age	Reformation
Enlightenment	Ancient Greece and Rome		Renaissance

19. _____

20. _____

21. _____

22. _____

23. _____

24. _____

25. _____